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ABSTRACT

Families and communities have enormous resources of knowledge around them that they use in their daily lives. Teachers may overlook or devalue these "funds of knowledge." Students, however, can benefit when teachers draw on community knowledge. Educationists advocate for the integration of subjects so that school curriculum is more relevant and challenging. But even when a curriculum is integrated, learning experiences may continue to be divorced from the daily home experiences of many families. This PEN Digest describes approaches which attempt to establish alliances between home and school in ways that are relevant to students and the communities in which they live, and which engage students in intellectually challenging activities. The Digest offers suggestions for teachers investigating alliances between home and school. It also provides some useful unit-starter ideas and teaching "pro formas" for various curriculum levels, such as "Increasing Biodiversity in the School Grounds," "Critical Analysis of Popular Television and Magazine Advertisements," "Emergency Services," "Class Survival Guide," and "Diversity in the Community." Includes a figure and illustrations. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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Ways with Community Knowledge. PEN 128.

by Greg Nelson

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Ways with community knowledge

GREG NELSON

Families and communities have enormous resources of knowledge around them that they use in their daily lives. As teachers, we may overlook or devalue these 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1990). However, students can benefit when teachers draw on community knowledge.

For example:

- Students and communities may form partnerships and work with teachers to negotiate pathways for teaching and learning. When these partners have significant input into classroom activities, they are keener to be involved in learning.
- There are many opportunities for integration across learning areas. When the curriculum focuses on the real concerns, needs and interests of students, supported by their families, there is a focus on achieving relevant, meaningful goals.
- Differences between students and their families may be celebrated as strengths. The diversity of ideas stemming from community involvement adds to the quality of the teaching and learning.
- There are opportunities to involve people who have expert knowledge. When these people are involved:
 - students can explore topics in greater depth than if they were relying on teacher knowledge
 - there are more adults for students to interact with and learn from in sustained conversations
 - teachers are seen as learners, too, and may model ways of learning
 - the class is able to develop as a learning community in which students, teachers and community members work together to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding of topics that matter to them.
- Students' interests can be incorporated into lesson designs, promoting high levels of engagement. In this way, the students' own knowledge and

experience are highly valued, and are important to the content of the lessons. Once they are engaged in activities that are relevant to their lives beyond the school, students' involvement in a unit can extend out of school hours, helping to instil values of lifelong learning.

Some useful unit-starter ideas and teaching pro formas may be found later in this PEN.

Educationists advocate for the integration of subjects so that school curriculum is more relevant and intellectually challenging (Newmann et al., 1996). However, even when the curriculum is integrated, learning experiences may continue to be divorced from the daily home experiences of many families. In these circumstances, students soon lose interest in what we are doing in the classroom. The approaches described below attempt to establish alliances between home and school in ways that are relevant to students and the communities in which they live, and which engage students in intellectually challenging activities.

Acquisition and learning

If classroom practices, or pedagogies, are considered as *discourses*, then Gee (1992) provides a valuable perspective from which to understand effective professional growth for teachers. Gee says (p 20) that discourses are social practices that "are composed of people, or objects (like books), and of characteristic ways of talking, interacting, thinking, believing, and valuing, and sometimes characteristic ways of writing, reading and/or interpreting". He argues that there are two

different ways through which people become familiar with discourses — *acquisition* and *learning*.

Acquisition is a process of gathering something subconsciously. It occurs without formal teaching, through exposure to models, trial and error, and practice within social groups. It happens in natural settings that are meaningful and functional, in the sense that the acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing in order to function. This is how most people come to control their first language.

Learning is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis — that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytical parts. Inherently, it involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of metalanguage about the matter.

According to Gee, we are better at *doing* what we acquire. On the other hand, we consciously *know more about*, and consequently can talk more about, things we learn. Furthermore, discourses are mastered through *acquisition*, not learning. People need to be at least apprenticed to a purposeful social environment to begin acquiring a discourse before productive learning can begin. This theory has important implications for how people are able to make changes to their current ways of doing things.

As teachers, we *acquired* our mastery of pedagogies when we were apprenticed to classroom life as children. We *learned* to talk about these discourses with various degrees of authority much later when we were gaining our tertiary credentials. We *learn* about enticing classroom practices that we do not have adequate opportunities to *acquire* — and therefore fail to master. The introduction of any new approaches to pedagogy must consider how to apprentice teachers effectively to the new ways, as well as making explicit and developing the actual curriculum framework. This implies the active construction of meaning within a socially supportive learning environment.

Valuing community knowledge

Classroom practices provide students with opportunities to acquire and learn language discourses. But if discourses are mastered through acquisition, and if acquisition occurs in settings that are meaningful and functional, what does this imply for classroom experiences?

Inevitably, teachers promote the use of some language forms over others — a practice that advantages some students while marginalising others (Gee, 1992). If our curriculum is narrow, therefore, we lock students out of opportunities for effective learning because our classrooms are not aligned with their needs and interests. Fig. 1 attempts to illustrate the continuities and discontinuities of language pathways from home to traditional school classrooms.

Figure 1

Home- and school-valued language forms

Home aligns with the traditional school-valued language forms

HOME Language forms valued in the home: Story books, middle-class vocabulary, newspapers, computer literacies	SCHOOL Language forms valued in the school: Story books, middle-class vocabulary, lots of print, computer literacies
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Home does not align with the traditional school-valued language forms

HOME Language forms valued in the home: television, oral language, popular magazines	
	SCHOOL Language forms valued in the school: Story books, middle-class vocabulary, lots of print, computer literacies

Valuing diverse community knowledge in the classroom provides a powerful leverage for developing inclusive curriculum. At the same time, it forges partnerships between home and school. Teachers can develop ways of drawing on the funds of knowledge present in the diverse family and community lives of the students in their classes. These funds of knowledge include the language skills valued in homes and work sites, and the ways in which families engage with diverse oral, written and visual texts in their everyday lives (see Beecher & Arthur, 2001).

When teachers value community knowledge, there is an attempt to move away from the forms of language traditionally found in classrooms, such as picture books, instructional readers, and IRE dialogue between teacher and students — that is, teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation of student response (Cazden, 1988). The shift may be towards the forms of literacy that are more familiar to students in their homes, including students from groups who are not achieving conspicuous success in schools.

Suggestions for teachers investigating alliances between home and school

1. Identify language forms used in homes and local communities, and find ways of valuing these in the school curriculum.
2. Develop school practices that make strategic connections between school and community, drawing on community funds of knowledge.
3. Bring participants together for discussion and collaborative reflection on their hopes, plans and classroom experiences.

Community resource starters

- Community organisations: emergency services like the ambulance, police and fire services.
- Government agencies: cultural and heritage authorities, local councils.
- Vocations: mechanics, chefs, shop-owners.
- Interest groups: wildlife, astronomy, heritage groups.
- Literacy resources valued in many homes: magazines, television programs (including advertisements), community-language newspapers.
- Family knowledge: cultural heritage, biographies, favourite cake recipes, stories.

Members of the school community are able to contribute substantive knowledge to the school curriculum. This is a shift away from a model that uses parents to provide low-level classroom assistance such as supervision of individual readers. For example, members of the community may be included in the planning process when developing units of work. They may be able to identify other valuable resources, or ways of learning that children enjoy. As partners, they gain a better understanding and appreciation of what teachers are attempting to achieve. This also opens possibilities for students to extend their studies beyond the school gate.

Effective alliances are forged on principles of reciprocal benefit. People in the community are willing to give their time because children from their community benefit. For many students, it is an unfamiliar and motivating experience to have members of their family, or people who they know in the community, visit the school to contribute to the 'academic' activities of the classroom.

A great advantage of this approach is that it produces curriculum that makes sense to students, teachers and families. Rather than breaking knowledge into isolated bits, units of work focus on integrating knowledge that may address issues of genuine concern to students or local communities. Not only do students (and their families) have genuine input into the teaching processes and curriculum content of schooling, they have opportunities to develop a mastery over a range of oral, written and visual texts that have direct relevance to their social worlds beyond the school.

Unit ideas

The ideas on the following pages are put forward as starting points. They reflect a series of projects undertaken by a group of teachers exploring the use of community knowledge in the curriculum (see 'End note').

Increasing biodiversity in the school grounds

A Year 5-7 class worked with the broader community to increase the biodiversity of the school grounds (Nelson, 1998). The students: researched the need for increasing biodiversity; developed a proposal to put to the school community, arguing the case to increase the biodiversity of the school grounds; and put their plans into action, which included raising funds to finance their proposal. The students will evaluate their work over time.

The teacher and students followed a unit structure that is used for open-ended problem-solving (and action research):

Four-step process

1. *See* Research the problem.
2. *Plan* Design possible solutions.
3. *Do* Put plans into action.
4. *Check* Monitor the effects of the actions.

Unit length

Several weeks, with the possibility of continuing activities based on the results of students' first round of actions.

Year level

Middle and upper primary

Community fund of knowledge
Local wildlife expert

Department of Natural Heritage and
Environment

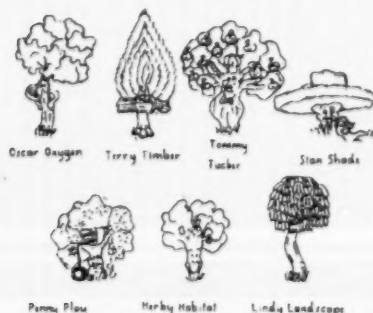
Parents' and Citizens' Association

Chef (Parent)

The Value of Trees

Trees are vitally important to our environment for various reasons:

The most important reason of all is oxygen. Trees take in carbon dioxide and release it with fresh clean air. Also they supply us with good quality wood for houses and furniture. And food will never run out with trees producing fruit. Trees are very useful for a shady place to sit and relax or even play around without the harmful rays of the sun spoiling it. Everyone loves animals. Thanks to trees, animals have a place to live and hide. Another great fact about trees is that they make the country and the city look so much more beautiful. All of these reasons and many more illustrate the value of trees.



Literacy event

The teacher and students invited the expert to the school. The class interviewed the expert, seeking advice about ways of improving biodiversity within the school grounds.

The class obtained pamphlets that provided information about ways of caring for the local environment. The class used the information to research their problem and compare the current school practices with best practice.

Students developed analytical expositions in the form of written arguments that were presented to members of the Parents' and Citizens' Association. They successfully argued the need to increase the biodiversity of the school grounds by adding more trees and building nesting boxes for birds.

The parent/chef advised students on foods they could prepare for sale at a community cake and sweet stall, correct labelling requirements, stall presentation and advertising, courteous and professional ways of serving customers, counting out change after a sale, and calculating profits. The students then implemented their plan to raise project funds through the stall.

Mrs. McGrath, a local wildlife expert visited our classroom. She described ways to increase biodiversity in the school grounds. After the visit, children made notes about what they learned.

School Visit: Mrs McGrath

- Water feeds native birds and small fish
- Birds need protection
- Cats and dogs can't climb trees if you put a bit of tin around the tree
- We would need to grow/plant different trees because different animals use different trees
- Kestrel makes out tadpoles of toads
- Change bird-baths water regularly
- Poisonous toads make more spots on their stomach
- Put feeders under tree canopy
- For a pond you need a camouflage fence and fish in the pond because then eat mosquitoes
- Animal nests can provide homes for animals/birds
- Kestrel makes great pest control



To keep toads out of ponds
you need a camouflage fence

Children used the graphic outline to plan their analytical expositions which were presented to the P & C along with a display of the students' work on biodiversity. One student's essay was published in the School Newsletter.

Analytical Exposition

Thesis: Like to see more biodiversity in the school grounds

Argument & Evidence

- Help run things and houses
- Provide animals homes and food, eg birds
- Put in better logs and bird houses
- Be safe or dogs in school grounds, safe environment

Argument & Evidence

- Makes school educational
- Reduces non-learner risk
- Lots of animals to study and look at
- Able to study different environments (water and marsh)

Argument & Evidence

- Beautiful the school
- Beautiful animals such as...
- Beautiful plants such as...
- Good food better

Argument & Evidence

- Makes school fun
- Provides places to play
- Means places for different activities
- Lots of animals to look at

Argument & Evidence

- Gives children responsibility
- Have to look after it
- Garden would depend on us

Conclusion: Restating the thesis

Problems and solutions - unwanted animals
- harder to mow
- might cause midnight bad reasons

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Community fund of knowledge

Local emergency services: police, ambulance, fire services, local press

Community artefacts

Parent and community audience

Literacy event

Local members of police, ambulance and fire services were invited to the school on a number of occasions to talk about emergency procedures. These visits were popular with students, who particularly enjoyed first-hand opportunities to look through vehicles, inspect equipment and view demonstrations. The importance of phoning 000 in an emergency, and giving the vital information, was discussed and practised on old phones that had been donated to the school. The fire service visited on several occasions, taking students through the procedures to follow if their clothes caught fire (stop, drop and roll - see below) or if their house caught fire (go low, then go, go, go). Later, articles related to these visits appeared in the local press.

Students set up a classroom display corner. Families provided a range of relevant artefacts. A 'hospital room' was set up, providing valuable opportunities for role-play and discussion. For example, when a collection of empty medicine bottles was brought to school, the class had valuable discussions about the use and abuse of medicines, and the need to follow advice on the labels. The students devoted a lot of their free time before school to playing in the 'hospital room', effectively extending their time for learning.

The students developed a series of presentations, including short plays, to demonstrate what they had learned during their investigations. Parents and family members were invited to attend a presentation afternoon.

Dear Fire Fighters Bear and Rupert

I learnt about the fire truck.
I like spraying the hose.

From Regan

Dear Fire Fighters Bear and Rupert

Thank you for coming to visit us.
I learnt about Stop, drop and roll.
I like spraying the hose.

From Curtis

Class survival guide

A Year 3-5 class wrote a class survival guide (Gant, 1998). This booklet contained information and procedures that the students judged to be important for people of their age to know. The students gained access to the information from local people who were asked to visit the school to demonstrate their knowledge first-hand. The information was recorded and later used to produce the *Class Survival Guide*.

Unit length

Several weeks

Year level

Middle primary

Community fund of knowledge

Parents and community members

Literacy event

The teacher and students set out to produce a booklet detailing information and procedures that the students identified as useful for them to know in order to 'survive'. Jointly, they brainstormed what to include in the booklet, and who in the community could help them to learn about the topics. The topic list included:

- how to make pikelets
- how to care for dogs
- how to tie a fishing rig



28 October 1996

Malibu State School
12 Victoria Terrace
Malibu, Qld, 4030

Dear Mr Martin,

The Grade Three, Four, Five class is currently doing a unit of work about instructional texts. For our work we thought it would be great to learn how to look after dogs and to write a booklet to help others to do it. We thought about who could help us and you were nominated. If you could help us, we would greatly appreciate it. We will need your help on any day that will suit you next week (Monday 15th - Friday 19th). If you are uncertain or would like to find out some more information, please contact Mr Gant at school.

Yours sincerely,
Grade Three, Four, Five

Mr Martin

I am (able) / unable to assist. I am available on (insert your preference of days and times):

Tuesday 15th - any time

Ring Tuesday - 1.30 pm



How to care for dogs

What we need:

* Food	* Collar and leash	* Registered Bath for ticks and fleas
* Water	* Bowls	* Register the dog
* Warm Towels	* Lots of care	

What to do:

1. Keep dog clean Bath twice a week	3. Feed the dog in the morning and at night a. Give morning toilet every day	5. Keep dog in your yard a. Give dog lots of love
2. Exercise the dog. Take it for walks		

- what to do if a snake bites
- how to make fettuccine
- how to sew
- how to look after a bike.

The teacher and students then invited selected people (see left) to visit the classroom to share their knowledge. While the students took notes and photographs (audio tapes might also be useful), these visitors demonstrated the various skills the students wanted to learn.

The students used the collected data to write procedural texts for the survival guide (see below).

The class produced the booklet and made it available for families to borrow. A copy was also placed in the school library.

How to look
after your bike

What you need:

- * Spanners
- * Chain oil
- * Puncture repair kit
- * Screwdrivers
- * Rags

What to do:

1. The main part of the bicycle is the frame. All of the nuts and bolts must be tight and kept tight.
2. Seat must be at the correct height. You can tell that it is at the right height by sitting on the seat. Your toes on both feet should just be able to touch the ground at the same time.
3. Make sure that the brake rubbers are in good condition and both squeeze tight against the rim when the brakes are on.
4. Make sure the chain has the correct tension and lubricated.
5. Make sure the gears are properly adjusted.
6. Oil both wheel bearings and the pedal crank.

Sarah, Robert, Timothy, Steven, Krystal



Diversity in the community

As part of an integrated multicultural unit, a Year 1-2 class asked parents to provide information about one of their ancestors (Barrett, 1998). The students used the information to write biographies. The biographies were collated to make a book that became available for individual members of the class to take home and share with their families. Parents were also invited to visit the school to demonstrate typical cooking from parts of the world. These demonstrations were scheduled once a week for the duration of the unit.

Unit length

Several weeks

Community fund of knowledge

Cultural artefacts of various families

Family members

Year level

Lower and middle primary

Literacy event

Students brought along cultural artefacts that belonged to their families. They used these as points of interest for oral presentations. The artefacts were also added to a class display, along with relevant information. One of the most popular displays was a collection of dolls from around the world. Clothes from various parts of the world were also added to the 'dress-up' corner.

The students decided to produce a book of family biographies as a resource for their multicultural studies. Using student input, the teacher provided an interview outline. Students used the outline when they interviewed a member of their family about their life. Students then drew on the interview information to write biographies. These were collated into book form. The book was made available for families to borrow; a copy was also made available for the school library.

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Parents were invited to the school to demonstrate and prepare typical food recipes from around the world. Demonstrations included pizza (Italy), almond crescents (Greece), scones (England), apple turnovers (France) and meatballs in choux pastry (Spain).

End note

The Ingham Project: Teacher-researchers investigate community funds of knowledge

The substance of this article is drawn from a collaborative research project undertaken by a group of educators working in rural North Queensland (Singh, Nelson & Elliot, 1998). The group was brought together with funds accessed through the Literacy in the National Curriculum (LINC) Project. Members of the group included a university professor, and teachers from government and non-government schools. The teacher-researchers worked in various ways to establish partnerships with their local and broader communities. Their challenge was to better understand how the community 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1990) could be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms.

Action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) was the model adopted to develop ways of using community knowledge in the classroom. A group of teachers each

developed independent action research projects, but came together as a supportive community of learners to reflect on their experiences. The teachers formed a network in order to:

- learn about action research
- read and discuss research relevant to their study (see Moll, 1990; Moll et al., 1992)
- share progress and reflect on their classroom research
- hypothesise about new ways that community knowledge could be incorporated into their classroom practices.

The collaborative network provided the support needed to trial ideas, *acquire* new pedagogies, and *learn* about what this meant for students and their families. This was a form of apprenticeship to new practices of teaching and learning. There were many informal discussions between participants in the periods between the formal sessions. The unit plans and case studies developed by participants became a valuable resource for the group, and provided a springboard for other educators.

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Greg Nelson is the principal of Sherwood State School in Brisbane, Queensland, and is currently finalising a doctoral thesis on children's interests at RMIT University. Greg co-facilitated the Literacy in the National Curriculum (LINC) Project, *Teachers' Ways with Community Knowledge*.
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